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A Coming of Age: The Foreign Policy of Anwar Sadat

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# Intelligence Memorandum

*A Coming of Age: The Foreign Policy of Anwar Sadat*

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**A Coming of Age: The Foreign Policy of Anwar Sadat****Summary**

A new era began in the Middle East in 1970 with the death of President Nasir and the assumption of power by President Anwar Sadat. In his foreign policy, not only toward Israel but toward the West, the East, and other Arabs as well, Sadat has introduced a flexibility that is unfamiliar to the Arab world. Sadat's style contrasts markedly with his predecessor's and evokes an image of Western-style pragmatism rather than of the rigidity that often typifies the Arab statesman.

Nasir might have introduced this new approach himself had he lived. Sadat has unquestionably benefited from Nasir's experiences. Where Nasir worked to make Egypt the leader of the Arab world, Sadat inherited Nasir's substantial achievements and had only to put his personal stamp on them. Where Nasir blundered by interventionism in foreign—particularly Arab—affairs, Sadat had before him the example of those blunders to help steer him away from the same course. Where Nasir faced a world at the height of a cold war that encouraged his own confrontation policies, Sadat's era has been one of great-power détente. The example of super-power accommodation has facilitated and probably inspired Sadat's own flexibility.

Sadat's new policy orientation has not been easily sold to an Arab world that paradoxically has been rigidly conservative in its radicalism. The modern Arab "progressive," typified and largely shaped by Nasir, is seen by outsiders as an inflexible, emotional xenophobe with a world view born of a sense of inferiority. That view, unencumbered by considerations of reality, ascribes predatory motives to anything Western and glories in visions of pan-Arab unity. Although somewhat exaggerated, the image is true in its essentials, built as much by the modern Arab's own actions as by outsiders' images of him. This is the legacy left to Sadat; he is attempting to reshape Egypt and, with it, the Arab world to a new image.

Whether he will succeed in the long run is problematical. Egypt has few of the tangible assets necessary to ensure the furtherance of the large vision Sadat has for his country. Egypt depends on outside sources for its military and economic survival. Sadat, moreover, needs the acquiescence of other Arabs even in furthering his negotiating strategy. The military and economic assistance provides Egypt with much of its political strength, but the very dependency endangers both its political independence and, in the long run, Sadat's ability to lead the Arabs through use of a flexible approach to diplomacy.

*Comments and queries on the contents of this publication are welcome. They may be addressed to [redacted] code 143, extension 6119.*

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### Nasir as Foreign Policy Maker

Nasir was at once a consummate exploiter of the Arab mentality and a victim of its manifestations in himself. He successfully used the Arab penchant for emotional rhetoric to galvanize support, at home and throughout the Arab world, for the causes he espoused: the struggle against Western "colonialism," the fight against Israel, and, up to a point, the crusade for pan-Arab unity.

Nasir failed, however, to appreciate the limits imposed by the very Arab character traits that he attempted to capitalize on in others and that he possessed in abundance himself. While the Arab—to a greater degree than members of other common linguistic groups—feels a sense of brotherhood with all who speak Arabic, he also has a predisposition toward conflict and disputatiousness that militates against the unity he strives for. Nasir's emphasis on pan-Arabism and his efforts to force an Egyptian-dominated unity on the Arab world failed to take account of this tendency toward conflict. His schemes for unity foundered and his efforts to dominate the Arab world led him into foreign adventures that drained his country's resources.

In the broader context of Egypt's relations with the non-Arab world, Nasir's own tendency toward conflict ultimately caused him to overplay his hand, to the detriment of his own and Egypt's long-range interests. Nasir was not entirely lacking in pragmatism. His success in forcing Britain's departure from Egypt was a pragmatic move inspired by a nationalism not unique to the Arabs. He was also able initially to maneuver successfully among the great powers.

In the long run, however, Nasir was unable to recognize that, while conflict with the outside world initially served him by establishing Egypt's "Arabism" and its independence, the country's interests thereafter demanded cooperation rather than confrontation. His basic inability to adapt his particular set of mind to Egypt's long-range needs caused him in the end to pawn his country to the very foreign influences, in a different guise, that he had struggled so hard to throw off.

The same inflexibility prevented Nasir from proposing possible concessions to Israel shortly after the war in 1967, when he might have concluded a satisfactory peace agreement. His concern for appearances imposed a rigidity on his position that precluded even an exploration of areas of compromise. In the process, concentration on war brought Egypt to the point of economic ruin.

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Nasir was a revolutionary. Like most revolutionaries, he was unwilling to adapt his policies and concepts to changing circumstances around him and unable to draw a line between rigid purpose and flexible practicality. He was, in short, unable to view the interests of the outside world except in terms of Egypt's interests—and more particularly in terms of his narrower vision of himself.

### Sadat as Foreign Policy Maker—The Theory

Sadat's goals differ from Nasir's only in subtle ways, but his strategy and tactics are markedly different. Both have asserted Egypt's position as prime mover in the Arab world, seeking to make it a force of importance in the outside world. But for Nasir, leadership of the Arabs was of overriding importance, whereas Sadat is more Egypt-oriented. His effort to maintain leadership of the Arabs and to build Egypt's international importance is less an end in itself than a means of furthering his primary goal: that of attracting the cooperation and assistance of other states in the task of advancing Egypt's economic development.

Like Nasir, Sadat knows the politics of confrontation and the tactics of a leader who can force attention to his country's interests by an adventurist foreign policy. The war in 1973 is a striking example. But he also knows the limits of confrontation and the advantages of cooperation. Sadat is aware of the interests of other states and realizes that some accommodation must be made if Egypt's own interests are to be furthered. He has consciously eschewed the revolutionary tactics, the appeals to emotionalism, and the invocation of "principle" in defense of inaction that have heretofore brought popularity but few foreign policy successes for progressive Arab leaders.

The essential tenets of Sadat's foreign policy are enunciated in his "October Paper," a set of policy guidelines intended to determine Egypt's course through the end of the century. The document, issued in early 1974, takes its name from the October war. Sadat's speeches are a continual reiteration of the paper's philosophy; taken together, speeches and paper constitute a primer for the Egyptian and Arab peoples in the unfamiliar ways of dealing with the outside world on a basis of equality and mutual cooperation.

The basic premise of Sadat's policy, as outlined in the October paper, is that the rigidity of the Arabs' revolutionary philosophy and their inability to adjust political policies within the Arab world to political and economic realities outside it have resulted in isolation and backwardness. The only way to bring Egypt into the 20th century, he believes, is to establish cooperative

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ties with a wide range of nations that can contribute to Egypt's technological advancement. Economic development is essential not only to unshackle Egypt from the "chains of backwardness" but also to maintain the position of importance the country gained through the October war.

For Sadat to attract the technological expertise and foreign investment that he frankly acknowledges Egypt lacks requires that Egyptians throw off fear of outside, particularly Western, influences and above all that they recognize the point at which principle is no longer principle at all but a self-defeating rejection of practical reality. "We reject," he declared in the October paper, "calls for stagnation under the pretext of adherence to principle."

Sadat views economic ties as the starting point for most of Egypt's relationships. He is prepared to overlook political differences with other states in the expectation that economic cooperation can benefit Egypt immediately and might gradually lead to greater political harmony. It is on this basis that Sadat has reoriented Egypt's approach to relations with other Arab states. He has worked, with considerable success but also many setbacks, to achieve Arab "solidarity" on the basis of mutually beneficial cooperation, rather than the demonstrably unworkable political "unity" so often sought in the past.

Because it seeks cooperation regardless of differences in political and social systems, Sadat's approach is more all-encompassing than that of Nasir, who sought out states of similar political hue but excluded—and more often attempted to subvert—states with divergent views. By proposing collaboration in areas of mutual economic interest, Sadat has attempted to neutralize active political opposition from radical Arab governments—for example, Iraq and South Yemen—and hopes thereby to exert a moderating influence over the long term.

Sadat believes that the more wide-ranging Egypt's diplomatic and economic relations, the better assured it will be of maintaining its political independence. The very diversity of its relationships, he feels, stands as a guarantee against dominance by any one state or bloc. This is his argument against opponents within Egypt who fear that the influx of Western and even Arab investors will bring a return to colonialism or outside "capitalist" domination. Sadat continually urges that Egyptians rid themselves of the "complexes" about foreigners that largely dictated Nasir's hostile policies toward the West.

Sadat himself has an abiding fear of Egypt's assuming a client-state relationship with either of the super powers, and his relations with them are

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governed by the same concern to maintain independence through diversity. Fearful primarily of returning to the political and military subservience that marked Egypt's relations with the Soviet Union before the expulsion of Soviet technicians in 1972, Sadat has decried efforts to define "spheres of influence" in the developing world. Falling into this polarization, he has said, is "the greatest danger that can befall a state." No country, he contends, can afford to be isolated from either the US or the USSR, and hostility toward one as the price of friendship with the other is both unrealistic and harmful.

Sadat's concept of foreign policy is unremarkable by pragmatic Western standards. By the standards of the Arab world, it is revolutionary. Sadat himself describes it as a new maturity. It is a positive policy undertaken on behalf of a people imbued with a negative attitude toward the non-Arab, non-Islamic world. It is a planned, action-oriented policy imposed where ad hoc, essentially reactive, decisions have been the norm. Sadat attempts to steer away from confrontation where possible. He seeks less to maneuver against one super power or the other than to cooperate with both. He sees the West and even Israel as models of technological advancement to be emulated, not enemies to be fought. He seeks to compete rather than to confront.

#### **A Strategy in Evolution**

Sadat did not come easily to recognize the benefits of a flexible, cooperative approach to foreign relations or to accept the necessity for a planned strategy. He was nurtured on the same revolutionary principles that guided Nasir, and he has been described by those who knew him in the 1950s and 1960s as a fire-eating "lightweight." The first years of his presidency were marked to a certain degree by an uncompromising attitude toward many foreign policy problems, by fruitless attempts to fulfill Nasir's vision of pan-Arab unity, and by a failure to look ahead to the long-range consequences of his decisions.

US-Soviet detente, more than any other single factor, forced Sadat to a re-evaluation. The cold war had been a comfortable situation for Egypt in many ways. Its strategic geopolitical position virtually guaranteed that Nasir could take actions with a surety that both Washington and Moscow would notice and that one or the other would respond to his needs. When he ultimately antagonized the US in the 1960s, Nasir could be sure the Soviets would champion Egypt's interests. He looked to Moscow to force a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. He could count on the Soviets to maintain pressure on the US for a settlement, and he could blame the Soviets for any compromises that he would find embarrassing to concede himself. And

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although Sadat began his presidency by turning to US mediation in the conflict, even he expected that Moscow would stand by as a check on Washington.

Detente altered Sadat's calculations. He had expected that the Soviets would press the Arab case during the US-Soviet summit in 1972; they did not. Although he expected less of the 1973 summit and had already markedly reduced his military and political dependence on Moscow, the Soviets' failure again to push the Arab line confirmed Sadat in the belief that, if the Arabs wanted movement in the Arab-Israeli situation, they would have to get it themselves.

Reflecting Sadat's views, the Cairo press in 1973 spoke of detente, in a wounded tone of almost naive wonderment, as evidence that the super powers after all conduct their affairs chiefly on the basis of self-interest and that the interests of client states are expendable. Sadat believed at that point that the US wanted stagnation in the Arab-Israeli situation; the Soviets' desire for better relations with the US placed them in the same category. Detente, Sadat felt, had lifted the restraints on US support for Israel by placing restraints on Soviet support for the Arabs, and the only way to alter this situation was to force Arab, and particularly Egyptian, interests on the attention of both super powers.

From detente grew Sadat's conviction that sole dependence on any one power is harmful in the long run. From detente came the lesson he has built into his foreign policy: that cooperation and accommodation on a broad scale, regardless of political and social differences, can best ensure the advancement of any state's interests. From detente came the redefinition of Egypt's nonalignment: "It is not likely that the international changes will come to a halt," Sadat told the Nonaligned Conference in September 1973, speaking of detente. "So it is wrong to view the policy of nonalignment (as)...a neutral stand among blocs; it is a positive policy."

#### **Putting Theory into Practice**

Sadat suffers the grave disadvantage of having to depend on outside sources for almost all the resources that contribute to Egypt's strength and thus to his own effectiveness as a foreign policy maker. Egypt is merely populous; it is not inherently strong. Nasir made it the leader and political center of the Arab world by the force of a personality that Sadat cannot equal and by tactics that he does not choose to match. Egypt's importance today rests almost solely on the fact that it is the principal Arab state confronting Israel and thus a major force for war or peace in an area of critical importance.

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Sadat seeks to bring permanence to Egypt's political strength by building the country economically and by giving it an intrinsic strength that will sustain it as a significant force in the Middle East beyond the time when a peace settlement with Israel might change the focus of world attention from issues of war and peace in the area to issues of oil and economics.

As he pursues his goal, however, Sadat is hampered by the very weaknesses he is attempting to overcome. His strategy is an intricate structure that depends at each level on the cooperation of some other party whose refusal could upset the entire balance. Egypt's leadership of the Arab world is essentially a state of mind, and Sadat has little tangible leverage with which to ensure the cooperation necessary to perpetuate that leadership.

Attracting foreign assistance for Egypt's economic development requires not only a willingness on Cairo's part to loosen doctrinaire socialist policies, but an atmosphere conducive to investment, which can come only from stability and an end to hostilities in the area. Peace with Israel, in turn, depends on a number of critical variables of which Sadat himself is not entirely the master.

His own accommodating negotiating strategy is in a sense hostage to the acquiescence of those Arabs, particularly Syria and the fedayeen, who could most easily upset a peace agreement. Achievement of an agreement, moreover, requires an ability to exert pressure on Israel as negotiations proceed. This comes not from Egypt alone but from the diplomatic intervention of the US and from the military strength provided by Soviet arms. The cooperation of other Arabs—of Syria on a second military front and of Saudi Arabia on the political/oil front—is also of critical importance.

Sadat has had considerable difficulty manipulating these divergent elements. Opposition at home has slowed the process of economic liberalization necessary to facilitate foreign investment. The Soviets have actively opposed his policies through propaganda deriding his "sellout" to capitalism and, more critically, through the reduction and occasional suspension of arms deliveries. At the same time, progress has been slow in peace negotiations, and he has had to balance pressures at home for quick movement on the Egyptian front against pressures from other Arabs—and from the Soviet Union—for the kind of multilateral negotiations at the Geneva peace conference that would necessarily impede progress on all fronts. More recently, he has had to justify the failure of his preferred negotiating course—the step-by-step approach mediated by the US—while attempting to keep other negotiating avenues open and to maintain a moderate policy.

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Sadat has gambled repeatedly that his political strength will sustain his policies where he lacks the tangible leverage to guarantee their implementation, but he has occasionally underestimated the risks inherent in that very strength. Indeed, the political clout he derives from his leadership of the Arab world makes him as much a hostage as it does a controlling influence.

In his relations with the Soviets, for instance, it is the mere fact that Sadat is the political leader of the Arab world and has turned his policies toward the US that has largely dictated Moscow's reduction of arms deliveries and the heavy Soviet propaganda campaign against Egypt's political and economic policies. The Soviet effort to control Sadat's policies would undoubtedly be less intense with a leader of lesser stature, as is evidenced by Moscow's heavy rearmament of Syria despite the fact that President Asad has also looked to the US in negotiations. Sadat's rebuff has hurt the Soviets more because of his greater political importance, and Moscow's response has accordingly been more pronounced.

Sadat failed to recognize, or chose to ignore, the risks that accompany political leadership when he initiated his series of highly critical public statements against Moscow last year. Sadat had a definite purpose in mind: he was responding to Soviet criticism of his domestic and foreign policies, and he hoped to portray Moscow in the eyes of other Arabs as an unreliable ally at a time when he was receiving Arab criticism for depending on the US. He also has a personal dislike for the Soviets and Soviet tactics that borders on the obsessive. Whether Sadat gambled that Egypt's political position would preclude Soviet retaliation, or that the US would compensate with military or at least political support, remains a moot point. Whatever his motive, his action contributed directly to Moscow's suspension of arms deliveries for several months last summer.

Sadat's leadership of the Arab world imposes the same paradoxical constraints on his relations with the other Arabs. His maneuverability is limited by the very fact of his leadership. In conducting a foreign policy—for example, negotiations with Israel—in the name of all Arabs, Sadat stands in relation to those Arabs very much as the leader of any individual state stands in relation to other domestic political leaders. Other Arab leaders constitute Sadat's Congress and his political parties—in effect, his domestic opinion makers. Just as any national leader must adjust his strategy and tactics abroad if these are opposed at home, so is Sadat's strategy often subject to the veto of Arabs who oppose him.

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This was evident at the Arab summit in 1974 when Sadat attempted, but failed, to convince the Arabs that realism dictated a decision to defer Palestinian negotiating demands and accord to Jordan the right to negotiate the return of the West Bank. Unable to carry his policy, Sadat went along with the other Arabs in putting the Palestine Liberation Organization forward as the party with first rights to the West Bank. The recent suspension of disengagement negotiations has also diminished his stature among the Arabs and could further diminish his ability to maneuver among them and to lead them in a flexible negotiating strategy.

### **Looking Ahead**

Sadat has not lost his gambles entirely. Despite his difficulties with the Soviets, they have resumed some arms deliveries without exacting a political price. He has not abandoned hope that US mediation can still produce progress in regaining Arab territory. Despite his difficulties with the Arabs, his leadership is still regarded, however grudgingly, as essential to any settlement. Sadat has shown himself in general to be adroit at maneuvering among opposing pressures and agile at avoiding inhibiting restrictions on his policy. With each setback he suffers at the hands of the Soviets or the Arabs, however, and with each failure to produce results from his policies, he loses a little of his stature among the Arabs and thus a little of his ability to be flexible.

Nasir maintained his leadership of the Arabs by being always a step ahead of the others—more anti-colonial than the other nationalists; more anti-Israeli than the Palestinians in whose name the struggle against Israel was fought; more radical, in short, than the radicals. Sadat, on the other hand, because his policy is geared primarily to attracting the cooperation of the non-Arab world, has adopted a style that is attuned more to the moderation of the outside world than to the radicalism of the Arabs. At the same time, to win acceptance of his policies among the Arabs, he must present them in a language the other Arabs understand.

Thus, negotiations with Israel became acceptable only because they were the extension of a war against Israel that had boosted Sadat's popularity immeasurably. He has not since been able to maintain that popularity, and he runs the risk of losing it completely unless he either woos his Arab constituency with radicalism or demonstrates to the Arabs by practical results that his pragmatic approach to leadership produces more than radicalism can.

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If he fails to make this demonstration, he will be left with a stark choice: to abandon his Arab constituents, and Egypt's primacy among them, in order to continue his flexible foreign policy; or to maintain Egypt's primacy among the Arabs by reducing his diplomatic flexibility to the least common denominator of his constituents. Either way, he would be sacrificing the achievement of his goals.

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